

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 1

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BEAT THE DEVIL

# THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ALI AGCA

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At precisely the moment the United States is lashing itself into a state of incoherent paranoia about the ambit and menace of terrorism, one of the prime exhibits in the pantheon of "terrorism" is collapsing before the eyes of the world's press assembled in Rome.

From the moment, in September of 1982, that a Bulgarian connection in the bid to kill the Pope was first proposed to a wide American audience by Claire Sterling in *Reader's Digest* and by Marvin Kalb on NBC, the presumed K.G.B.-backed plot has been taken as the weightiest evidence for the existence of a Terror International sourced in Moscow. Agca's "confession" was of immeasurable help to the Reagan Administration in its denunciations of the Evil Empire.

But ever since the most keenly anticipated show trial of our time began in Rome on May 27, what has been emerging in outline is the story not of a K.G.B.-inspired plot but of a right-wing conspiracy to bring off a major propaganda coup in the cold war, throw some more dung on the already putrefying corpse of détente and, specifically, discredit the left in Italy. If the witting executors of this conspiracy are found in official and paragovernmental organizations in Rome and Washington, the unwitting—to put it most charitably—agents are located in the offices of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, NBC, PBS and *Reader's Digest*. It will be instructive to see how all these outfits deal with the proceedings in Judge Severino Santapichi's courtroom in the next few weeks, now that Agca has only to open his mouth for everyone there to start laughing.

What has emerged since the start of the trial? To the mortification of the prosecution, Agca immediately announced that he was Jesus Christ and has most recently proposed that he demonstrate his resurrecting technique for President Reagan, who is, after all, old enough to be interested in such skills. What U.S. newspapers failed to report is that this identification with the Godhead is not some sudden and surprising disturbance in Agca's mental equilibrium. Turkish journalists at his 1980 trial for the murder of the newspaper

editor Abdi Ipecki have stressed that Agca exhibited traits of megalomania and instability. The only person who may not have been discommoded by Agca's claims to be Christ is Claire Sterling, who has always taken his words as gospel and who presumably attributes to divine powers his capacity to move undetected around Europe and across wide bodies of water such as the Mediterranean Sea.

Agca had a second surprise for the eager journalists in court: the disclosure of his direct contact with the K.G.B. in Sofia in July of 1980. The weight of this disclosure was undercut by the fact that he had said this before and had subsequently retracted it. But the explosive aspect of events unfolding in Rome has been the increasing evidence that during the long months of his incarceration, Agca was coached by agents of the highly politicized and rightist SISMI, the military branch of Italian intelligence. This is entirely contrary to the image of Agca's isolation promoted by Sterling and the rest of the conspiracy mongers. By their accounts Agca was held incommunicado in a sterile cell, divulging elements of the great plot which were then patiently corroborated by the tireless Judge Ilario Martella. The purity of Agca's recollection about the Bulgarian connection became virtually an article of faith in much of the Western media, even though he developed these recollections only after spending eighteen months in an Italian jail and though to this day they have never been corroborated by any external evidence.

## Who Coached Agca?

It has already been well established that Agca got much of his "uncanny command of detail" from such useful and unsterile sources as Italian television (available in prison), Italian newspapers (ditto) and a telephone book decently made available to him by his translator. The path to Agca's cell was a well-trodden one, with intelligence emissaries dropping in for a chat without the knowledge of the egregious Martella. But Agca has given detailed descriptions of the Bulgarian Sergei Antonov's apartment and of the physical circumstances of a "plot" to kill Lech Walesa when the latter was visiting Rome. He later retracted the stories (as he has those of plots to kill Queen Elizabeth, Tunisian President Bourguiba and others), explaining that he got the supporting details from the newspapers. But it has been shown that such details had never appeared in the press.

From whom, then, did he get those details? On June 16 the Italian magazine *L'Espresso* announced that it was

about to publish some startling assertions by Giovanni Pandico, the state's main witness in a trial in Naples against the Mafia. Pandico asserted that Pietro Musumeci, deputy chief of military intelligence (SISMI), had used a Mafia chieftain to approach Agca in the Ascoli Piceno prison in March 1982 to offer him his freedom in return for implicating the Soviet bloc in the plot to kill the Pope. (Agca began to recall the Bulgarian connection shortly after that date.) *L'Espresso* reported Pandico's story in its issue appearing on June 17.

*Continued*

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# Around the World

## Turk Denies Any Role In Attempt to Kill Pope

Special to The New York Times

INSTANBUL, Turkey, July 10 — A Turk accused of being the link between Soviet bloc intelligence services and a right-wing Turkish terrorist who shot Pope John Paul II in 1981 today denied having any part in a purported plot to kill the Pope.

The 50-year-old Turkish businessman, Bekir Celenk, who Mehmet Ali Agca, the Pope's convicted assailant, says acted as an intermediary for a Soviet diplomat in Bulgaria and offered Mr. Agca \$1.2 million to assassinate the Pope, appeared before a military tribunal investigating the killing in 1979 of a Turkish newspaper editor, Abdi Ipekci. It was his first public appearance since returning to Turkey from Bulgaria over the weekend.

Mr. Celenk told the tribunal that he stayed at the Hotel Vitosha, in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital, in 1980, when Mr. Agca asserted he met him there to plot the Pope's shooting. He said he was a "casual acquaintance" of Musa Serdar Celebi, another Turk accused of supporting the Pope plot.

But he said that "the claims that I helped Agca, in supplying guns and money in the Pope plot are not true."